



# Alienation and empathy as mediators of the relation between Social Dominance Orientation, Right-Wing Authoritarianism and expressions of racism and sexism <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Prior research has established a link between Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), empathy, and generalized measures of prejudice. Whether empathy functions as a mediator for more specific forms of prejudice has not been studied. Furthermore, alienation and its role in predicting prejudice have been given little attention in the literature. Our results found that empathy functioned as a mediator for SDO, but only for sexism, not racism. Alienation was found to act as a mediator between SDO and both racism and sexism. The relation between Right-Wing Authoritarianism and racism and sexism was not mediated by alienation.

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## 1. Introduction

How people interpret the behavior of others, how they view others, and how they interrelate with other people have been suggested to be influenced, in part, by two worldviews (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). One worldview, based on Social Dominance Theory and known as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), suggests that the world involves competitive relations among people; power and maintaining ingroup dominance are considered very important in interpersonal relations. Another worldview, known as Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), suggests that the world is a dangerous place, something to be feared; respecting the status quo, following the rules of society, respecting aggressive acts approved by authority figures, are believed necessary to control the frightening, unpredictable elements of society (see Duckitt & Sibley, 2007; Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002).

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These worldviews help to establish a personal and interpersonal sense of order, structure, and control. The negative derivative is that these worldviews help to form and consolidate negative attitudes towards outgroups who are perceived as either a competitive threat or a threat to the existing order of things (Duckitt et al., 2002). An established relation exists between concern over maintaining status and position (i.e., SDO), concern with the status quo and maintaining order (i.e., RWA), and negative attitudes to various groups (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998). Although RWA and SDO are related (Altemeyer, 1998; Heaven & Bucci, 2001), Sibley and Duckitt (2008) concluded using meta-analytic techniques that both SDO and RWA are strong and unique predictors of prejudice.

Little research has examined the specific mediators by which SDO and RWA influence prejudicial attitudes. McFarland (2010) found that empathy acted as a mediator for SDO and generalized prejudice. Specifically, SDO was inversely related to empathy which was, in turn, related to fewer prejudicial attitudes. There has been some debate as to whether empathy is a cognitive (e.g., Deutsch & Madle, 1975) or affective (e.g., Miller & Eisenberg, 1988) construct. Davis (1983) has conceptualized and operationalized empathy to be a multidimensional construct, incorporating both cognitive and affective elements. Here, empathy is described as the emotional and cognitive ability to understand and share the experiences of others and their emotional states (Davis, 1983). Those experiencing greater empathy experience greater positive

attitudes towards individuals from various stigmatized groups (Batson et al., 1997) as well as greater prosocial and cooperative behaviors (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Being able to take another's perspective may be a key element in reducing prejudice (Andreychik & Gill, *in press*). Indeed, perspective-taking, one component of empathy, was associated with decreased prejudice and discriminatory behaviors (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Shih, Wang, Bucher, & Stotzer, 2009). It seems that to be concerned with taking another individual's feelings into account and sharing their emotional state is in contradiction with the desire to maintain higher status and separation with outgroup members, a critical feature of high SDOs.

Similarly, previous research suggests that alienation may be related to SDO (Nicol, 2007). Alienation is the extent to which a person feels a sense of belonging to various elements of social life (Hajda, 1961). People who experience alienation disengage from society and from themselves (Simmons, 1966), thus experience less emotional attachment and involvement to their workplace (Efraty, Sirgy, & Claiborne, 1991; Hirschfeld, Field, & Bedeian, 2000), and greater hostility (Tolor & LeBlanc, 1971). Luke and Maio (2009) found alienation to be significantly negatively correlated with a person's evaluation of humanity, the extent to which a person views human beings as valuable, useful, and good. Because SDO measures perceptions of superiority over outgroup members, we would expect those scoring high on SDO to also experience more interpersonal – and possibly intrapersonal – alienation, as social relations are meaningful and valuable only to the extent that one wishes to interrelate with others on the same plane. Bobo and Hutchings (1996) found that individuals who experienced racial alienation would perceive outgroup members as competitors (viewing others as competitors is related to the SDO worldview). Nicol (2007) found that individuals with high SDO scores had higher alienation scores, suggesting that they do not perceive relationships with other people and social institutions as meaningful. We found no research directly examining the relation of alienation with negative attitudes towards outgroups, however, its association with hostility, and intolerance of human frailty (McClosky & Schaar, 1965) suggest there may be a relation with prejudice. If an individual is primarily concerned with maintaining hierarchical distance and privilege, then they may become alienated from others and from themselves, this may consequently influence attitudes towards others.

With regards to RWA, researchers have suggested that alienation may be correlated with Authoritarianism (Dean, 1961; Knapp, 1976). Sexton (1983) found a significant correlation between alienation and dogmatism. McClosky and Schaar (1965) found alienation to be associated with rigidity and intolerance with ambiguity which are conceptually related with RWA's dangerous worldview motivational foundation (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007). If fear is a primary motivational drive for those scoring high on RWA, they may feel more alienated from people and themselves, resulting in stronger negative attitudes towards others. In contrast, Nicol (2007) directly examined and found no evidence for an RWA-alienation relationship. Given the minimal amount of research, we tested the hypothesis that alienation would function as a mediator between RWA and racism and sexism.

## 2. Current research

Alienation and empathy may be important in developing and maintaining positive interpersonal relations and in creating a positive framework for dealing with outgroup members, yet few, if any, have studied the relation between alienation and prejudice, and empathy's role as a predictor for racism and sexism. We built upon and extended McFarland's (2010) research by examining whether empathy mediates the effects of SDO for more specific facets of

prejudice – in particular, racism and sexism – and by exploring the role of alienation as a mediator for both SDO and RWA.

We expected empathy to act as a mediator between SDO and prejudice, as well as predict unique variance in racism and sexism. In contrast, we did not anticipate that empathy would play a role in the relation between RWA and prejudice as Heaven and Bucci (2001) found that RWA did not correlate with sympathy (a measure of concern and interest for others) or with Agreeableness. McFarland (2010) also did not find a relation. Next, we anticipated that alienation would explain unique variance in racism and sexism, as well as act as a mediator between SDO and prejudice and wished to explore whether it functioned in a similar capacity for RWA.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

We recruited participants online by advertising our study on two internet sites, Social Psychology and Psychological Research on the Net. 355 participants started the voluntary survey, but given the online nature of the study, only 205 participants completed the entire study. This sample was on average 23.80 years old ( $SD = 9.15$ ), mostly female ( $n = 145$ ), had attained at least a high school diploma ( $n = 88$ ) or university degree ( $n = 50$ ), and were either white ( $n = 142$ ) or black ( $n = 24$ ).

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Right-Wing Authoritarianism

The short-form Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (RWA; Pardini, 2008) modelling Altemeyer's (1998) scale measures agreement with authoritarian principles and ideology, using 12-items. Responses are recorded using a scale of 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Higher scores indicate a greater tendency towards authoritarian personality ( $\alpha = .85$ ).<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.2.2. Social Dominance Orientation

The Social Dominance Orientation scale (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) measures participants' preference for social hierarchy and group dominance. The SDO scale consists of 16 items answered on a scale of 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Higher total scores imply greater desire to maintain differences between social groups ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

#### 3.2.3. Empathy

We measured empathy using the Perspective-taking and Empathetic Concern subscales from the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980). Nine items from the Perspective-taking subscale measure the extent to which people understand the situation from another's point of view. Fourteen items from the Empathetic Concern subscale measure the extent to which participants can relate to and feel concerned about others. Participants responded to both subscales using a scale of 0 (*Does not describe me well*) to 4 (*Describes me very well*). Scores were summed across all items to form a composite index ( $\alpha = .87$ ), with higher scores indicating higher levels of empathy.

#### 3.2.4. Alienation

We utilized the Powerlessness and Nihilism context items from the Interpersonal and Self subscales from the original 60-item Alienation scale (Maddi, Kobasa, & Hoover, 1979) because of their

<sup>1</sup> All measured variables conformed to previously reported factor structures. Further information can be obtained from the first author upon request.

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